

PART II - SECULAR HISTORY

CHAPTER 12

EARLY APOSTASY IN THE CHURCH

General purity of the apostolic churches - Early decline of their piety - False teachers arose in the church immediately after the apostles - The great Romish apostasy began before the death of Paul - An evil thing not rendered good by beginning in the apostolic age - How to decide between truth and error - Age cannot change the fables of men into the truth of God - Historical testimony concerning the early development of the great apostasy - Such an age no standard by which to correct the Bible - Testimony of Bower relative to the traditions of this age - Testimony of Dowling - Dr. Cumming's opinion of the authority of the fathers - Testimony of Adam Clarke - The church of Rome has corrupted the writings of the fathers - Nature of tradition illustrated - The two rules of faith which divide Christendom - The first-day Sabbath can only be sustained by adopting the rule of the Romanists.

The book of Acts is an inspired history of the church. During the period which is embraced in its record, the apostles and their fellow-laborers were upon the stage of action, and under their watchcare the churches of Christ preserved, to a great extent, their purity of life and doctrine. These apostolic churches are thus set forth as the proper examples for all coming time. This book fitly connects the narratives of the four evangelists with the apostolic epistles, and thus joins together the whole New Testament. But when we leave the period embraced in this inspired history, and the churches which were founded and governed by inspired men, we enter upon altogether different times. There is, unfortunately, great truth in the severe language of Gibbon:

"The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings."¹

What says the book of Acts respecting the time immediately following the labors of Paul? In addressing the elders of the Ephesian church, Paul said:

"For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."²

It follows from this testimony that we are not authorized to receive the teaching of any man simply because he lived immediately after the apostolic age, or even in the days of the apostles themselves. Grievous wolves were to enter the midst of the people of God, and of their own selves were men to arise, speaking perverse things. If it be asked how these are to be distinguished from the true servants of God, this is the proper answer: Those who spoke and acted in accordance with the teachings of the apostles were men of God; those who taught otherwise

were of that class who should speak perverse things to draw away disciples after them.

What say the apostolic epistles relative to this apostasy? To the Thessalonians, it is written:

"Let no man deceive you by any means; for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. . . . For the mystery of iniquity doth already work; only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."[3](#)

To Timothy, in like manner, it is said:

"Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."[4](#)

These texts are most explicit in predicting a great apostasy in the church, and in stating the fact that that apostasy had already commenced. The Romish church, the eldest in apostasy, prides itself upon its apostolic character. In the language of Paul to the Thessalonians, already quoted, that great Anti-Christian body may indeed find its claim to an origin in apostolic times vindicated, but its apostolic character most emphatically denied. And herein is found a striking illustration of the fact that an evil thing is not rendered good by the accidental circumstances of its originating in the days of the apostles. Everything, at its commencement, is either right or wrong. If right, it may be known by its agreement with the divine standard. If wrong at its origin, it can never cease to be such. Satan's great falsehood which involved our race in ruin has not yet become the truth, although six thousand years have elapsed since it was uttered. Think of this, ye who worship at the shrine of venerable error. When the fables of men obtained the place of the truth of God, he was thereby dishonored. How, then, can he accept obedience to them as any part of that pure devotion which he requires at our hands? They that worship God must worship him in Spirit and in truth. How many ages must pass over the fables of men before they become changed into divine truth? That these predictions of the New Testament respecting the great apostasy in the church were fully realized, the pages of ecclesiastical history present ample proof. Mr. Dowling, in his History of Romanism, bears the following testimony:

"There is scarcely anything which strikes the mind of the careful student of ancient ecclesiastical history with greater surprise than the comparatively early period at which many of the corruptions of Christianity, which are embodied in the Romish system, took their rise; yet it is not to be supposed that when the first originators of many of these unscriptural notions and practices planted those germs of corruption, they anticipated or even imagined they would ever grow into such a vast and hideous system of superstition and error, as is that of popery. . . . Each of the great corruptions of the latter ages took its rise in a manner which it would be harsh to say was deserving of strong reprehension. . . . The worship of images, the invocation of saints, and the superstition of relics, were but expansions of the natural feelings of veneration and affection cherished toward the memory of those who had suffered and died for the truth."[5](#)

Robinson, author of the "History of Baptism," bears the following testimony:

"Toward the latter end of the second century most of the churches assumed a new form, the first simplicity disappeared; and insensibly, as the old disciples retired to their graves, their children along with new converts, both Jews and Gentiles, came forward and new modeled the cause."6

The working of the mystery of iniquity in the first centuries of the Christian church is thus described by a recent writer:

"During these centuries the chief corruptions of popery were either introduced in principle, or the seeds of them so effectually sown as naturally to produce those baneful fruits which appeared so plentifully at a later period. In Justin Martyr's time, within fifty years of the apostolic age, the cup was mixed with water, and a portion of the elements sent to the absent. The bread, which at first was sent only to the sick, was, in the time of Tertullian and Cyprian, carried home by the people and locked up as a divine treasure for their private use. At this time, too, the ordinance of the supper was given to infants of the tenderest age, and was styled the sacrifice of the body of Christ. The custom of praying for the dead, Tertullian states, was common in the second century, and became the universal practice of the following ages; so that it came in the fourth century to be reckoned a kind of heresy to deny the efficacy of it. By this time the invocation of saints, the superstitious use of images, of the sign of the cross, and of consecrated oil, were become established practices, and pretended miracles were confidently adduced in proof of their supposed efficacy. Thus did that mystery of iniquity, which was already working in the time of the apostles, speedily after their departure, spread its corruptions among the professors of Christianity."7

Neander speaks thus of the early introduction of image worship:

"And yet, perhaps, religious images made their way from domestic life into the churches, as early as the end of the third century; and the walls of the churches were painted in the same way."8

The early apostasy of the professed church is a fact which rests upon the authority or inspiration, not less than upon that of ecclesiastical history. "The mystery of iniquity," said Paul, "doth already work." We are constrained to marvel that so large a portion of the people of God were so soon removed from the grace of God unto another gospel.

What shall be said of those who go to this period of church history, and even to later times, to correct their Bibles? Paul said that men would rise in the very midst of the elders of the apostolic church, who would speak perverse things, and that men would turn away their ears from the truth, and would be turned unto fables. Are the traditions of this period of sufficient importance to make void God's word? The learned historian of the popes, Archibald Bower, uses the following emphatic language:

"To avoid being imposed upon, we ought to treat tradition as we do a notorious and known liar, to whom we give no credit, unless what he says is confirmed to us by some person of undoubted veracity. . . . False and lying traditions are of an early date, and the greatest men have, out of a pious credulity, suffered themselves to be imposed upon by them."9

Mr. Dowling bears a similar testimony:

"The Bible, I say, the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants! Nor is it of any account in the estimation of the genuine Protestant how early a doctrine originated, if it is not found in the Bible.

He learns from the New Testament itself that there were errors in the time of the apostles, and that their pens were frequently employed in combating those errors. Hence, if a doctrine be propounded for his acceptance, he asks, Is it to be found in the inspired word? Was it taught by the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles? . . . More than this, we will add, that though Cyprian, or Jerome, or Augustine, or even the fathers of an earlier age, Tertullian, Ignatius, or Irenaeus, could be plainly shown to teach the unscriptural doctrines and dogmas of Popery, which, however, is by no means admitted, still the consistent Protestant would simply ask, Is the doctrine to be found in the Bible? Was it taught by Christ and his apostles? . . . He who receives a single doctrine upon the mere authority of tradition, let him be called by what name he will, by so doing steps down from the Protestant rock, passes over the line which separates Protestantism from Popery, and can give no valid reason why he should not receive all the earlier doctrines and ceremonies or Romanism upon the same authority."10

Dr. Cumming of London thus speaks of the authority of the fathers of the early church:

"Some of these were distinguished for their genius, some for their eloquence, a few for their piety, and too many for their fanaticism and superstition. It is recorded by Dr. Delahogue (who was Professor in the Roman Catholic College of Maynooth), on the authority of Eusebius, that the fathers who were really most fitted to be the luminaries of the age in which they lived, were too busy in preparing their flocks for martyrdom to commit anything to writing; and, therefore, by the admission of this Roman Catholic divine, we have not the full and fair exponent of the views of all the fathers of the earlier centuries, but only of those who were most ambitious of literary distinction, and least attentive to their charges. . . . The most devoted and pious of the fathers were busy teaching their flocks; the more vain and ambitious occupied their time in preparing treatises. If all the fathers who signalized the age had committed their sentiments to writing, we might have had a fair representation of the theology of the church of the fathers; but as only a few have done so (many even of their writings being mutilated or lost), and these not the most devoted and spiritually minded, I contend that it is as unjust to judge of the theology of the early centuries by the writings of the few fathers who are its only surviving representatives, as it would be to judge of the theology of the nineteenth century by the sermons of Mr. Newman, the speeches of Dr. Candlish, or the various productions of the late Edward Irving."11

Dr. Adam Clarke bears the following decisive testimony on the same subject:

"But of these we may safely state that there is not a truth in the most orthodox creed that cannot be proved by their authority; nor a heresy that has disgraced the Romish church, that may not challenge them as its abettors. In points of doctrine, their authority is, with me, nothing. The word of God alone contains my creed. On a number of points I can go to the Greek and Latin fathers of the church to know what they believed; and what the people of their respective communions believed; but after all this, I must return to God's word to know what he would have me to believe."12

In his life, he uses the following strong language:

"We should take heed how we quote the fathers in proof of the doctrines of the gospel; because he who knows them best, knows that on many of those subjects they blow hot and cold."13

The following testimonies will in part explain the unreliable nature of the fathers. Thus Ephraim Pagitt testifies:

"The church of Rome having been conscious of their errors and corruptions, both in faith and manners, have sundry times pretended reformations; yet their great pride and infinite profit, arising from purgatory, pardons, and such like, hath hindered all such reformations. Therefore, to maintain their greatness, errors, and new articles of faith, 1. They have corrupted many of the ancient fathers, and reprinting them, make them speak as they would have them. . . . 2. They have written many books in the names of these ancient writers, and forged many decrees, canons, and councils, to bear false witness to them." [14](#)

And Wm. Reeves testifies to the same fact:

"The church of Rome has had all the opportunities of time, place and power, to establish the kingdom of darkness; and that in coining, clipping, and washing, the primitive records to their own good liking, they have not been wanting to themselves, is notoriously evident." [15](#)

The traditions of the early church are considered by many quite as reliable as the language of the Holy Scriptures. A single instance taken from the Bible will illustrate the character of tradition, and show the amount of reliance that can be placed upon it:

"Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved, following (which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?); Peter seeing him, saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me. Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die; yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" [16](#)

Here is the account of a tradition which actually originated in the very bosom of the apostolic church, which nevertheless handed down to the following generations an entire mistake. Observe how carefully the word of God corrects this error.

Two rules of faith really embrace the whole Christian world. One of these is the word of God alone; the other is the word of God and the traditions of the church. Here they are:

I. THE RULE OF THE MAN OF GOD, THE BIBLE ALONE.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." [17](#)

II. THE RULE OF THE ROMANIST, THE BIBLE AND TRADITION.

"If we would have the whole rule of Christian faith and practice, we must not be content with those scriptures which Timothy knew from his infancy, that is, with the Old Testament alone; nor yet with the New Testament, without taking along with it the traditions of the apostles and the interpretation of the church, to which the apostles delivered both the book and the true meaning of it." [18](#)

It is certain that the first-day Sabbath cannot be sustained by the first of these rules; for the word of God says nothing respecting such an institution. The second of these rules is necessarily adopted by all those who advocate the sacredness of the first day of the week. For the writings of the fathers and the traditions of the church furnish

all the testimony which can be adduced in support of that day. To adopt the first rule is to condemn the first-day Sabbath as a human institution. To adopt the second is virtually to acknowledge that the Romanists are right; for it is by this rule that they are able to sustain their unscriptural dogmas. Mr. W. B. Taylor, an able anti-Sabbatarian writer, states this point with great clearness:

"The triumph of the consistent Roman Catholic over all observers of Sunday, calling themselves Protestants, is indeed complete and unanswerable. . . . It should present a subject of very grave reflection to Christians of the reformed and evangelical denominations, to find that no single argument or suggestion can be offered in favor of Sunday observance that will not apply with equal force and to its fullest extent in sustaining the various other 'holy days' appointed by 'the church.'"[19](#)

Listen to the argument of a Roman Catholic:

"The word of God commandeth the seventh day to be the Sabbath of our Lord, and to be kept holy: you [Protestants] without any precept of Scripture, change it to the first day of the week, only authorized by our traditions. Divers English Puritans oppose against this point, that the observation of the first day is proved out of Scripture, where it is said 'that the first day of the week.'[20](#) Have they not spun a fair thread in quoting these places? If we should produce no better for purgatory and prayers for the dead, invocation of the saints, and the like, they might have good cause indeed to laugh us to scorn; for where is it written that these were Sabbath days in which those meetings were kept? Or where is it ordained they should be always observed? Or which is the sum of all, where is it decreed that the observation of the first day should abrogate or abolish the sanctifying of the seventh day, which God commanded everlastingly to be kept holy? Not one of those is expressed in the written word of God."[21](#)

Whoever therefore enters the lists in behalf of the first-day Sabbath, must of necessity do this - though perhaps not aware of the fact - under the banner of the Church of Rome.

1 Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, chap. xv. <[Return](#)>

2 Acts 20:29, 30. <[Return](#)>

3 2Thess.2:3,4,7,8. <[Return](#)>

4 2Tim.4:2-4; 2Pet.2; Jude 4; 1John2:18 <[Return](#)>

5 Book ii. chap. i. sect. 1. <[Return](#)>

6 Eccl. Researches, chap. vi. p. 51, ed. 1792. <[Return](#)>

7 The Modern Sabbath Examined, pp. 123, 124. <[Return](#)>

8 Rose's Neander, p. 184. <[Return](#)>

9 Hist. of the Popes, vol. i. p. 1, Phila. ed., 1847. <[Return](#)>

10 History of Romanism, book ii. chap. i. sects. 3, 4. <[Return](#)>

11 Lectures on Romanism, p. 203. <[Return](#)>

12 Commentary on Prov.8. <[Return](#)>

13 Autobiography of Adam Clarke, LL.D., p. 134. <[Return](#)>

14 Christianography, part ii. p. 59, London, 1636. <[Return](#)>

15 Translation of the Apologies of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others, vol. ii. p. 375. <[Return](#)>

16 John 21:20-23. <[Return](#)>

17 2Tim.3:16,17. <[Return](#)>

18 Note of the Douay Bible on 2Tim.3:16,17. <[Return](#)>

19 Obligation of the Sabbath, pp. 254,255. <[Return](#)>

20 Acts 20:7; 1Cor.16:2; Rev.1:10. <[Return](#)>

21 A Treatise of Thirty Controversies. <[Return](#)>

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